

Submission to Warwick IEA, 'Closing the Gap' – Opening up Opportunities for Adults

1. Submission is sent on behalf of Lifelong Learning Centre, University of Leeds by Lindsey Fraser, Deputy Director (Partnerships)
2. The remit of the Lifelong Learning Centre (LLC) is to work with mature, part-time and foundation-level learners, especially where this enables participation of people from groups that are under-represented in higher education. The LLC offers a range of full and part-time programmes as well as being a hub for mature students at the University supplying academic and pastoral support throughout the student cycle as well as a substantial outreach programme engaging with adult learners from low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs). There are over 500 students on LLC undergraduate programmes and 1700 adult learners from local communities take part in non-accredited activity

A buoyant adult education service is essential for people from disadvantaged backgrounds having opportunities to progress into higher education and therefore endeavouring to increase their life choices. Experience at the LLC indicates that fewer adult learning opportunities, particularly the decline in community provision, has a serious impact on progression from LPNs. With over 30 years in the field of adult education with non-participant communities throughout West Yorkshire we are extremely keen to contribute constructively to this consultation.

3. Executive Summary

- Without a standardised service in England, the good practice that does exist throughout the adult education spectrum is determined by local motivations.
- Leeds provides an example of how cross-sectoral co-operation enhances adult education delivery.
- The needs and requirement of adult learners are varied. Responsive provision assists the alleviation of situational and attitudinal barriers to participation, targeting those disadvantaged communities with few qualifications.
- Adult education has become a low-status occupation with a lack of bespoke rigorous training. This has a detrimental impact of the overall quality of provision and innovation, including uses of digital technologies.
- Community development is central to encouraging adults to participate in education or training. Local evidence indicates that reductions in community organisational capacity impacts on rates of participation.
- Provision responsive to employers is targeted towards low-skilled jobs with little indication of prioritising the upskilling of adults from LPNs.
- Adults with few opportunities are less likely to make demands on the educational system; empowerment should be a part of the adult educator role alongside quality IAG.

- Local evidence aligns with national research indicating the economic, health and wellbeing value of adult education, alongside community provision, as creating a safe space promoting community cohesion.
- Policy developments: i) funding streams that would allow for 5-year local strategic plans to address needs identified through cross-sectoral partnerships; ii) bringing adults from the margins to the mainstream of widening participation policies which would contribute to increased adult education capacity in LPNs; iii) reinstating Individual Learning Accounts, particularly for those lacking employability skills and qualifications.

4.1 What is working well and/or not working well with regards to adult education in England?

Nationally

Good practice takes place in all forms of adult education: basic skills, ESOL, work-based /vocational learning, family and community learning etc. This is evidenced by the annual Festival of Learning, Adult Learner Awards, evaluations of fixed term initiatives by NIACE e.g. Community Learning Initiative Fund etc. There remains a workforce, although substantially reduced, with a clear commitment to the field of adult education.

However, this practice is piecemeal and dependent on local initiatives. The non-statutory nature of adult education means that there is no standardised service across England.

This has been exacerbated by reductions in funding, with community-learning provision now targeted at the most vulnerable adults which may exclude many from disadvantaged communities, e.g. inner city areas and peripheral housing estates, who have little or no formal educational qualifications.

Current policy allows for free English and Maths GCSE provision for those adults who have not gained a C in these subjects. GCSEs are a key point in progression pathways for adults both into employment and further/higher education, therefore it is essential that this provision continues. However the fees/loan system for other level 2 and level 3 qualifications is, in our experience, proving a barrier to progression.

Locally

Community learning in Leeds is overseen by the Community Learning Trust Board which has cross-sectoral representation. There is a well-established strategic alliance comprising of Leeds City Council, Leeds City College, third sector, private sector providers and HE institutions to identify gaps in need and how to address these. However, the short-term nature of funding is a barrier to developing an effective strategy with meaningful objectives.

In terms of the LLC partnership working includes FE, the local authority, the third sector, Jobcentre Plus, libraries and early years, very successfully supporting the progression of adults into the University of Leeds.

Example

The Realise programme aims to address the lack of progression for adults from GCSEs and equivalent level 2 qualifications. The Lifelong Learning Centre works with Leeds City College's Adult and Community Education service at nine centres in low participation neighbourhoods throughout Leeds. The programme consists of multiple activities and interventions including aspiration-raising sessions with adults who are studying GCSE or equivalent vocational qualifications in FE community learning centres; impartial one-to-one information, advice and guidance offered to all participating adults individually and in group sessions; and delivery of a summer school for adults from across Leeds. Participants indicate year-on-year success in supporting the progression of LPN adults to higher education.

4.2 What policies and/or practices best motivate disadvantaged adults to engage in adult learning?

A service that is bespoke to adults and understands their differing needs, that takes into account adult life experiences and that offers a range of educational opportunities, as this is not a homogenous group. Understanding that adults often begin their 'second chance' learning journeys in non-instrumental provision, which may then lead to skills training or formal qualifications.

Practice to motivate adults alleviates the following barriers:

- Finance
- Travel
- Childcare or other caring responsibilities
- Lack of information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- Attitudinal factors such as low confidence and low self-esteem
- Access to digital technology and the need for support to gain confidence in different modes of learning

As with standard-age teaching, inspirational tutors are fundamental to motivating adults. However, adult education is no longer a status profession with very few robust teacher training programmes in lifelong learning. This affects the quality of creativity and innovation in the sector. This will be essential if the sector is to utilise online modes of learning successfully for this cohort. At present there is no evidence that adults from LPNs are benefiting from online learning.

Many adults from LPNs undertake adult education due to key influencers in the community such as community development workers, early years and community-based third sector staff. Multi-agency working is really beneficial to cascading information to local communities. In our experience, reductions in community-facing

work has an impact on the participation of those adults with fewer educational qualifications¹.

4.3 Do we have an approach to adult education which is sufficiently demanded? If not, what more needs to be done? Who or what, in your view, determines demand?

Policy documents indicate the importance of employers in determining demand. However, in our experience the employment-related skills training available to disadvantaged adults is aimed at low-skilled jobs with very little discussion around the long-term upskilling of this cohort.

A high proportion of adults who are keen to progress into higher education wish to undertake vocational routes e.g. nursing and midwifery. This demand is not accommodated due to lack of places.

Adults that have had few opportunities in life do not necessarily have the information to make demands on the system. A key element of community adult education is empowerment, giving adults the skills and confidence to explore different trajectories and make demands on providers for appropriate provision.

At the LLC we endeavour to stimulate individual demand by:

- Offering impartial IAG
- Delivering non-accredited provision which explores a range of different curriculum and employment-related areas
- Working with local employers to take into account their workforce needs

4.4 What evidence is there on the impact, added-value and/or cost-effectiveness of adult education?

Nationally

Relevant recent documents:

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/AdultLearningStatementofAmbition_tcm4-826940.pdf

<http://www.wea.org.uk/download.aspx?id=3509>

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/34671/12-1243-review-wider-benefits-of-adult-learning.pdf

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http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/sites/niace_en/files/resources/2015%20Adult%20Participation%20in%20Learning%20-%20Headline%20Findings.pdf

Locally

Evidence gained throughout the years at the LLC indicates the predominant route for mature students from widening participation backgrounds progressing to the University is via community adult education with interventions from LLC staff. These include IAG, non-accredited community-based provision, study days on campus and the adult learner summer school. LLC inputs are all undertaken in collaboration with a range of providers.

We have undertaken quantitative research on the intergenerational impact of adult learning which suggested a positive impact on families. Moreover, our experience and observation of adult learning in a very diverse city signifies the importance of community education as a space for developing community cohesion.

Research then indicates that these adult learners who become graduates have increased health and well-being, higher salaries and active citizenship -

<http://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2013-full-report.pdf>

4.5 Name three major policy developments necessary to secure the future of adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5 -10 years?

1. Funding streams that allow for 5-year local authority-led adult education strategic plans, accountable to the Community Learning Trust Board, which identify the needs and aspirations of an area and how these will be addressed. These plans to incorporate adult education for social mobility, well-being, social cohesion as well as instrumental skills for employment. These plans to include a pathways framework, outlining the possibilities for education and training progression from non-formal learning in the community to higher education.
2. Widening participation to higher education policy to give greater recognition and weight to adults/mature students. At present all policy documents² assume that widening participation relates to standard age (18 year-olds). A greater emphasis on LPN adults, with monitored targets, would support HEIs to increase their outreach in communities. As well as supporting the recruitment of mature students, who are more likely to come from diverse backgrounds than standard age³, this would also enhance the local adult education services and be mutually beneficial to both sectors.
3. The reinstatement of the innovative Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) scheme, with far greater monitoring and accountability, which aims at widening participation in learning and helping to overcome financial barriers faced by learners, particularly amongst those who lack skills and qualifications. This would be particularly beneficial to adults in FE who at present view finance and the taking out of loans as a key barrier.

² For example:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523396/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf

³ For example: <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance-and-useful-information/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-mature-learners/>